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ABSTRACT

Incorporating a service learning assignment into the public relations course can more strongly increase understanding of concepts because students are forced to apply class theories to a setting with real-world consequences. Specifically, service learning is a form of experiential learning that engages students and faculty in the common good. It is a form of transformative learning that enriches the educational process by helping students apply theory to service. There are four goals for service learning assignments: to direct personal goals by enhancing student development through improved self concept; to explore moral and ethical positions about self and community; to prepare students for participation in a democracy as informed citizens; and to improve student learning by linking practical experience with academic subjects. This paper addresses how a public relations class service learning project can have a positive influence on students, faculty, and the community. An example of a public relations service learning project linking Lake Superior State University (LSSU) students with nonprofit groups in the community is outlined in the paper's Appendix A. The paper explains that, in the assignment, students are broken into consulting groups which meet with clients outside of class and conduct the necessary research and interviews to develop a public relations proposal for their nonprofit group. It states that students report on their progress throughout the semester during scheduled "traffic meetings" (similar to corporate work-in-progress meetings); they then present their final proposals to their clients. (NKA)

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Service learning in the public relations course and its impact on students, faculty, and the community

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The basic public relations course is frequently taught using assignments based on case studies and hypothetical scenarios. These teaching tools are valid and help facilitate student learning of concepts. However, incorporating a service learning assignment into the public relations course can more strongly increase understanding of concepts because students are forced to apply class theories to a setting with real-world consequences.

Specifically, service learning is a form of experiential learning that engages students and faculty in the common good - it is not volunteerism; it is a form of transformative learning that enriches the educational process by helping students apply theory to service (Bruess, Byers, Lowery-Hart, Shue, & Shue, 1999). There are four goals for service learning assignments: to direct personal goals by enhancing student development through improved self-concept, to explore moral and ethical positions about self and community, to prepare students for participating in a democracy as informed citizens, and to improve student learning by linking practical experience with the subject of an academic course (Lott, Michelmore, Sullivan-Cosetti, & Wister, 1997).

Service learning involves the development of partnerships between the community and educational institutions. These alliances are formed for the mutually beneficial uses of resources (Bruess et al., 1999). In order to be effective, service learning projects should follow several steps. The instructor should decide what learning is expected, develop community partnerships to facilitate the learning of concepts, prepare the learners for the project, assist learners in developing plans for the community organization, monitor student learning, evaluate student learning, and celebrate the successful completion of the project with all involved parties (Bruess et al., 1999).

This paper will address how a public relations class service learning project can have a positive influence on students, faculty, and the community.

The Project

An introductory public relations course is tailor-made for experiential learning. This type of course focuses on the use of a variety of communication strategies to influence internal and external publics. Students learn the basic steps attached to planning and implementing public relations campaigns. Specific tactics such as instruction on how to write press releases and public service announcements are generally also included in such a course.

There are many non-profit groups in the community surrounding a campus that could benefit from assistance in publicizing an upcoming event, analyzing audience awareness of their service, or developing new ideas to increase membership and/or donations.

An example of a public relations service learning project linking Lake Superior State University (LSSU) students with non-profit groups in the community is outlined in Appendix A. In this assignment, students are broken in to consulting groups. These groups are then responsible for interfacing with a non-profit group chosen by the instructor. Clients used have included Habitat for Humanity, The Diane Peppler Women's Shelter, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Red Cross, and United Way. The students are to help their clients solve a public relations problem their organization is facing. The students meet with clients outside of class and conduct the necessary research and interviews to develop a public relations proposal for their non-profit group.

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Students report on their progress throughout the semester during scheduled "traffic meetings." These meetings are similar to corporate meetings where project managers report on work-in-progress to management. These traffic meetings allow the instructor to note and address potential problems before they get out of control. The traffic meetings also allow for free sharing of feedback and suggestions from students on other project teams.

Project teams ultimately present their final proposals in a presentation to their clients. Other campus community members are also invited to help create a professional atmosphere for these presentations.

Impact on Students

A service learning assignment, such as the public relations project described above, can have a positive impact on students in several different ways. Service learning can increase understanding of course material, it can increase critical thinking skills, and it can increase civic involvement.

Students' understanding of course material is enhanced through service learning. They need to be able to not only recognize and recall course theories and concepts, but to be able to apply them to real-world situations. Service learning can help students make this jump by developing the disposition necessary for success in the workplace (Muir, 1996).

Students are likely to be more engaged in course material in conjunction with service learning projects. For example, Muir (1996), points out that his students were more motivated to create written documents for their business communication consulting

clients because they felt the documents would be put to use and weren't just classroom "busy work."

Student work on the public relations assignment at LSSU echoes the above sentiment. Students in the public relations class were more conscientious in their writing and proofreading. They also tended to go the extra mile in terms of creating additional helpful public relations materials for clients that had not been solicited. For example, a group that was working with a woman's shelter created a computerized database of media outlets and addresses to assist the shelter in future publicity campaigns.

Service learning, as a pedagogical method, can increase student critical thinking skills (Bruess et al., 1999). Developmental psychology theories suggest that education for college students is about meaning making and this is best facilitated in an interactive process, such as experiential programs permit (Linn, 1999). According to Bruess et al. (1999), students involved in service learning are more likely to develop higher-order critical thinking skills like reflection, analysis, synthesis, integration, application, and comprehension (p. 6).

The implications of increasing critical thinking skills becomes obvious as students learn how to better negotiate their relationships with clients and contribute to communication problems that may not have even been evident to their clients (Muir, 1996). A prime example of this concerned an LSSU public relations project team that was working with a local organization that offered a diverse array of services to the community including running a recycling center and training educable mentally handicapped citizens. When first meeting with the client, the project group was asked to work on a project promoting the umbrella organization. The students were able to step

back from their client's initial request and realize that what the organization needed was to conduct a survey of community awareness since it was unlikely local citizens associated the services of the branches of the organization by the name of the umbrella organization.

Because the students are interacting with service organizations, they are likely to better understand their community, challenge their prejudices, and expand their view of culture and society (Bruess et al., 1999). Service learning provides students with an opportunity to become involved with civic issues and to be more prepared to take an active role in their communities in the future (Bruess et al., 1999; Langseth, 1996). LSSU project team members have become more involved based on their interaction with their clients. For example, a student offered to oversee the printing process of a non-profit group's newsletter that was proposed even though doing so would extend well beyond the end of the semester. Students have a sense of wanting to see things through to their completion because the goal of the organization has become more important than the mere completion of a class assignment.

Impact on Faculty

Experiential assignments can also have a positive impact on faculty who embrace service learning as part of their courses. However, because service learning projects are more complex and unpredictable than traditional classroom assignments, instructors need to be reminded that service learning is time consuming, disruptive, and occasionally controversial for all involved (Lott et al., 1997). The advantages of this instructional methodology, however, far outweigh the disadvantages. Service learning can help

instructors approach a course in a more structured manner, increase student participation in the course, and help an instructor rediscover their passion for informed citizenship.

Just because service learning assignments take students out of the classroom, giving the instructor less control, that does not mean that the quality of student learning suffers. Evidence suggests that service learning courses can be as rigorous as more traditional courses (Harkavy & Romer, 1999).

An instructor can insure rigor in an experiential assignment by following a basic structure for assignments. The components of preparation, participation, and reflection are essential for effective service learning (Lott, et al., 1997). In the preparation component, students immerse themselves in relevant course material with the guidance of the instructor. The participation component involves student interaction with community clients. The reflection component is the final step. According to Lott et al. (1997), the reflection component distinguishes service learning from volunteering because it makes connections between individual experience and theoretical understanding.

Faculty members know the importance of bringing more than book learning to a course. Because service learning actively engages students in the community, their enthusiasm spills over into the classroom, increasing student participation. Service learning gives good, average, and weak students their own unique experiences and insights which make the classroom come alive (Lott et al., 1997, p. 42). The LSSU experience fits this profile well. Student participation does increase and the specificity of student comments increases as well. All students become better students because they have a vested interest in the outcome of the project.

Besides the pedagogical advantages of incorporating service learning into the curriculum, Langseth (1996) describes the affective benefits of service learning for instructors and students alike:

> It has been my experience that many of us who are interested in excellence in teaching and learning yearn for ways in which we can rediscover our own passions for changing the world through our work. Equally important, we yearn for ways to instill passion in our students - both for the subject matter itself and for its relevance in helping address the issues of our time. I believe...that service learning is a powerful pedagogical tool that can help us achieve these objectives. (p. 2)

Impact on Community

Service learning not only benefits students and faculty, but the community as well (Harkavy & Romer, 1999). Educational institutions can have an impact on real needs in their communities (Bruess et al., 1999). As Bruess et al. (1999) point out, most non-profit groups do not have the resources to pay for a communication consultant, even if they would benefit from that expertise.

At LSSU, the student final presentations are a way to bridge the gap between the university and the community. Client representatives come to campus for the student presentations. They are treated as true clients and a professional atmosphere is achieved through student dress and demeanor. Refreshments are made available and students learn to act as hosts to their clients. This instills a sense of professional decorum and helps students become more comfortable with increasing their networking skills. Besides the clients, members of the campus community are invited to attend. The university president

and college dean have both attended past presentations. This demonstrates to the clients that university administration finds interaction with the community outside of campus to be integral to the learning experience of LSSU students.

Because of their interactive nature, service learning projects can help erase the artificial separation of town and gown:

> There is always the temptation to return to the mythic image of the "college on the hill" - and to suffer the consequences. But there is an increasing realization that, by becoming engaged in an effective and proactive fashion, we can contribute to the solution of these problems while also promoting the educational development of our students and faculty. (Harkavy & Romer, 1999, p. 14)

Service learning projects, such as the public relations assignment described in this article, provide real-world application that benefit not only the students in the course, but the faculty member, campus community, and local community as well.

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Appendix A

Group Consulting Project
SD320 - Spring 2000
100 points

Project overview

You will be working with your group to develop a proposal for a real public relations client. This project should be approached as if you were working as a professional in the public relations field. You will research, plan, and propose a public relations campaign for your client. It is expected that you conduct yourself in a professional manner when interfacing with your client.

Project components

Traffic Meetings

At five points during the semester we will hold an "agency" traffic meeting. Your group will be given a timeline in advance to fill out for the meeting. One person from your group will serve as your representative for each meeting. You should have a different group member representing your group at each meeting. Your traffic meeting grades will be based on how well prepared your group is and how well your representative articulates the dimensions of your project.

Written Proposal

The bulk of this project will center on your group developing a written proposal. The proposal should be well written and professionally produced. Your proposal will address all elements of the RACE acronym. You will be preparing your written proposal following the Program Plan format attached. For Step #5 (Specific Tactics), you should include sample press releases, storyboards, etc. Samples of proposals from past semesters will be on reserve in the library.

You will first hand in a draft of your proposal so that you can get feedback prior to your client presentation. This draft should be as well produced as possible, as it will be graded. Your group will then revise the proposal, based on suggestions, and hand that in to your client and me on your presentation day.

Presentation

Your group will be responsible for presenting your proposal in a professional manner to your client and the others who will be in the audience on your presentation day. Your group will also have a chance to rehearse your proposal. This rehearsal will be graded, so you should be as prepared as possible. You will then receive feedback from me and the class so that your group's final presentation will run smoothly.

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